



**Universidad**  
Zaragoza

## Undergraduate Dissertation

### **LISA BIRD-WILSON'S *PROBABLY RUBY*: THE TRICKSTER AND THE RESILIENCE JOURNEY OF NATIVE AMERICANS**

Author

María Palomino Lallana

Supervisor

Dr. Silvia Martínez Falquina

Faculty of Arts

Facultad de Filosofía y Letras de Zaragoza

June 2023

## ABSTRACT

The following dissertation is focused on *Probably Ruby* (2022) by Lisa Bird-Wilson, a contemporary author of Native heritage. In this novel, Bird-Wilson revives the figure of the trickster from the Native oral tradition and incorporates it into this narrative as a recurring presence in which Ruby, the protagonist, sees herself mirrored. Throughout the story, Ruby embodies several of the trickster's characteristics and reflects the desire to revive the native identity, which has historically been mistreated due to the remnants of British colonization. Through the forthcoming analysis analysis, the fundamental role of literature in the social struggle of Native Americans is explored. The trickster, as a literary and cultural entity, becomes a tool in contemporary fiction that allows for the rewriting of the history of Native communities, celebrating the richness of these peoples. Consequently, the following essay explores the trickster's qualities as reflected in Ruby, illustrating how they embody and the courage to survive and the urgency to learn how to cope with a history marked by violence.

## RESUMEN

El siguiente trabajo se centra en la obra *Probably Ruby* (2022) escrita por Lisa Bird-Wilson, una autora contemporánea de ascendencia nativa. En esta novela, Bird-Wilson recupera la figura del *trickster* de la tradición oral nativa y la incorpora como un elemento presente en su protagonista, Ruby. A lo largo de la historia, Ruby encarna las cualidades del trickster y refleja el deseo de revivir la identidad nativa, históricamente maltratada por los vestigios de la colonización británica. Mediante el siguiente análisis, se explora el papel fundamental de la literatura en la lucha social de las tribus nativo-americanas, transmitiendo valores culturales y sociales. El trickster, como un personaje literario y cultural, se convierte en la ficción contemporánea en una herramienta que permite reescribir la historia de las comunidades nativas y ensalzar, del mismo modo, la riqueza identitaria de estos pueblos. Por ende, el siguiente análisis desglosa las cualidades del trickster que se ven reflejadas en Ruby y mediante las cuales se ilustra el arrojo por sobrevivir y la urgencia por aprender a sobrellevar una historia marcada por violencia.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Lisa Bird-Wilson, the author of *Probably Ruby* (2020), is a contemporary Canadian author who identifies herself as an indigenous Métis-Cree. Native to Saskatoon, Lisa Bird-Wilson had her life marked by the consequences of the British colonization on the Native American population. She suffered in her own experience the consequences of the policies of the Sixties Scoop period. According to the First Nations Drum, this period is defined as “an alarming national phenomenon” (Dolha) which took place in Canada between the late 1950s to the early 1980s in which Aboriginal children were forcibly separated from their families by government authorities and placed into adoptive white families, with the intention of assimilating them into the dominant white population. Although little is known about her biological family, Lisa Bird-Wilson has verified that, upon discovering that she was one of the Sixties Scoop children, she learned about her ancestral background, a combination of Métis and Cree heritage. Although raised by white parents, Bird-Wilson has embraced her indigenous heritage and identifies herself as a Native woman who not only celebrates her culture but also expresses it through literature in novels like *Probably Ruby*. These two ethnic groups were equally victims of the British rule and were “removed, displaced and dispossessed of land” (Logan 434), however, they constitute nowadays two of the biggest Native nations in Canada. As a matter of fact, the term ‘Métis’ originates from the French word for ‘mixed’, signifying their heritage as the descendants of the intermingling of Europeans traders and Cree Natives, who were skilled traders, hunters and foragers.

As it is exposed in the first section of chapter two of this dissertation and as certain life testimonies like Bird-Wilson’s exemplify, the social reality of Native American communities is significantly shaped by the legacy of colonization in which the Native American population suffered the mistreatment of their culture and beings and the resultant physical, economic and

cultural upheaval imposed by the settler colonization starting in 1606. *Probably Ruby* is not only a novel with autobiographical traces in which the author reflects the struggle of the children whose Native identity was neglected, but on top of that, this novel deals with the consequences of the British colonization that are still manifesting in the contemporaneity of Native communities. As a matter of fact, Lisa Bird-Wilson admitted during a radio interview for the CBD Radio that the life of Ruby, the protagonist of the novel, resembles hers and the struggle of all Native children who suffered the hollowness of wandering in search for their real family and culture (CBD Radio). However, it is not only the feeling of absence of belonging and culture that *Probably Ruby* deals with through the experience of Ruby. On contrary, this novel addresses the Native American impulse to resist and flourish within a world where their culture and worldview are under-considered. It is in that effort of surviving that this dissertation if focused, since *Probably Ruby* is one of the examples of the new cultural strategy of contemporary Native American authors which consists in bringing back the figure of the trickster and his history of enhancing the traditional values of the Native culture. In the case of this novel, the appearance of this figure is made through the behavior of Ruby, who mirrors the trickster in its ways.

Hence, the present paper explores the connections and influences that Ruby shares with the trickster and how this relationship leads to address the Native American social problematic, the figure of the trickster *per se* and how these two elements are combined in the contemporary panorama of Native American literature. This essay aims to prove, by taking the example of Ruby, how contemporary Native American writers have recuperated the trickster in contemporary Native American fiction as a force to help Natives resist and restore their lost identities in the settler colonization reality that has historically displaced them. The following chapters, therefore, revolt around illustrating the connections that Ruby possesses with the trickster spirit and to draw a line

between that union and the struggle of disposed Native American communities. In order to do so, the present essay is going to explore in the first place the American Indian Historical trauma and the role of the trickster both in the oral tradition and in the contemporary Native American fiction. After that theoretical approach, chapter three aims to illustrate the trickster's influence in the life of Ruby. Similarly, chapter four explores the role of storytelling and narrative building as a way of recuperating Native American culture. Lastly, the final chapter of this essay explores the resilient atmosphere in which Ruby tries to develop her own narrative and how that constitutes both the journey towards survival and the aim of surviving itself.

## **2. THE HERO OF THE DISPOSED: THE TRICKSTER AS THE FIGHTER FOR NATIVE AMERICAN IDENTITIES**

### **2.1 American Indian Historical Trauma**

When approaching the Native American panorama nowadays, the social malaise of these communities seems to be increasingly apparent. The genesis of this circumstance, however, may be located in the development of the colonial enterprise by the British since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The expansion of the European settlers in the North American territories was marked by violence and the relegation of the well-being of Native American communities. This period in the history of Native American tribes emotionally and psychologically wounded entire generations and gave way to the origin of a collective trauma that nowadays plagues their societies and manifests itself in social epidemics like addictions and other structural problems such as domestic violence. In 2014 in the *Transcultural Psychiatry Journal*, Joseph P. Gone first introduced the acronym AIHT, which stands for “American Indian Historical Trauma”. In that instance, Gone put a name to the already

recognized “historical unresolved grief” (DeBruyn & Brave Heart 60) that was born during the period of white occupancy and is still present in the reality of Native American communities nowadays. The repercussions arising from this traumatic outcome posed challenges for the Native population including “annihilation, dispossession and displacement, subjugation and domination, destruction and loss” (Martínez-Falquina, “Re-mapping” 209). In contrast to, perhaps, the majority of instances of trauma that tend to be experienced by an individual, AIHT is collective, cumulative and inter-generational. “It affects entire families; it compounds across multiple devastating experiences and is passed along from ancestors to descendants” (Gone 389-90).

It is especially the particularity of being shared by a whole culture that catalogues AIHT as a social pathology that plagues the Native American communities (DeBruyn & Brave Heart 60) and results in what may be seen as a terrible health problematic. As a matter of fact, health associations such as the U.S Department of Health and Human Services agree with these researches when claiming the social damages that Natives are experiencing and prove the consequences of that trauma-affected environment with statistics that show how Native Americans are subject to higher rates of suicide, homicide and accidental deaths, domestic violence and child abuse or alcoholism in comparison to other ethnicities (“Mental and Behavioral Health”).<sup>1</sup> Similarly, for the National Center for Biotechnology Information, the prevalence of dysfunctional family life and mental disorders Native American communities generally portray is the inevitable

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<sup>1</sup> Findings from the 2018 National Survey on Drug Use and Health reveal that “the rate of Native Americans with an alcohol use disorder (7.1%) is higher than that of the total population (5.4%)” (“Risks of Alcoholism Among Native Americans”). Moreover, according to the results from the 2019 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, “the overall death rate from suicide for American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) adults is about 20% higher as compared to the white population. Violent deaths, unintentional injuries, homicide, and suicide account for 75% of all mortality in the second decade of life for American Indian/Alaska Natives” (“Mental and Behavioral Health - American Indians/Alaska Natives.”). Regarding domestic violence and according to the National Library of Medicine, “in comparison to other races/ethnicities, American Indians/Alaska Natives have higher rates of interpersonal violence, child abuse and violence against women” (“Family and Partner Interpersonal Violence among American Indians/Alaska Natives.”).

consequence of the “loss of culture and traditions” they were brutally exposed to during the white imperial enterprise (“Family and Partner Interpersonal Violence”). In words of *Brave Heart*, this reality of addiction and abuses surrounding Native Americans is the result of a coping mechanism to the historical traumatic experience the whole community suffered. Therefore, these sick conditions characteristic of traumatized realities echo the cry of the deprived and disposed Native identities that were repressed and lost by decades of white oppression.

## **2.2 The Trickster: The Cultural Hero**

As discussed in the previous section, Native American communities find themselves in the midst of a challenging political and social backdrop characterized by abuses and violence which finds in the settler colonization logics the origin of the problematic. In this context, Native American contemporary writers bring back the figure of the trickster, traditionally associated with the celebration of tradition and culture, which emerges as a savior and ultimately contributes to the resurgence and survival of the historically under-considered Native cultures which have endured years of neglect.

The trickster is a folklore figure born in the oral tradition of “nation to nation” (Robinson), since there are as many tricksters as Native American communities. In general, this figure is characterized by its elusive nature and its “troublesome psychological discrepancy” (Basso 292). As B. Basso explains in *The Trickster's Scattered Self*, the folkloric figure of the trickster has a disposition of fluctuating between the selfish buffoon, “who ludicrously acts in violation of the most fundamental social values” and the cultural hero, “who makes the world safe and secure for human life” (293). Historically, the trickster’s stories were not just a mere entertainment resource, in contrast, the stories of the trickster provided Native communities with knowledge about their societies, cultural norms, rules of behavior and legal approaches. Trickster researchers have come

across different functions of this complex figure. For instance, as Amanda Robinson notices, trickster stories illustrate the central notion of family for Native Americans and the tension the individual motivation and the familiar clan encompass. Similarly, law professor John Borrows claims that trickster stories are a source of knowledge regarding Indigenous rights and legal traditions (114-30). This attribute of enhancer of the cultural history has been an essential part in the development of Native American traditions and its nature of cultural projector has been used to diffuse Native American traditional knowledge about society, culture and morality<sup>2</sup> through storytelling.

In contemporary times, when the colonization traces continue affecting the Native American reality, the figure of the trickster appears in written literature to continue its task of cultural hero and representative of Native identity. Silvia Martínez-Falquina discusses the “trickster power” (“Trickster Discourse” 146), since “the trickster” is not a character *per se* in fictional stories, but an intangible, ongoing presence that is shared in the repressed communal identity of Native Americans whose main objective is healing a culture that has been historically mistreated by white imperialism. Accordingly, this folklore figure of the trickster encapsulates in itself “a metaphor of resistance who is capable of overcoming a system of oppression” (Mohanty 85). Considering the prolonged and enduring challenges faced by Native American cultures, seeking avenues for cultural revitalization and identity seems to be the way to heal the wound and thrive in the mainstream cultural sphere of white colonizers. In fact, the trickster is characterized

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<sup>2</sup> In this line of thinking, it is necessary to bear in mind the multiculturality of Native Americans and the wide variety of cultures within the Native American and Canadian society. Therefore, the forms and purposes of the trickster vary as the culture varies. Amanda Robison listed some of the tricksters that may appear in different Canadian Native American cultures to prove the variety of tricksters and trickster ways. If Cree culture offers “an adventurous and humorous trickster, afforded prestige as a teacher to humankind”. Nanabush, from the Ojibwe, is described as a double-spirit trickster eager to play tricks on people. The trickster is the reflection of culture, therefore, there are as many tricksters as Native American cultures.

by being “a culture-builder” (Martínez-Falquina, “Trickster Discourse” 143) and by having “the power, not merely to reproduce reality but also to heal and transform the world” (Martínez-Falquina, “Trickster Berdache” 217). For those reasons, the trickster is presently recovered in contemporary Native American literature “as a means of reinscribing a differential identity for contemporary Natives” (217). It is possible to conclude that the trickster, always characterized as a physical and spiritual wanderer (Robison), is being rewritten and reconsidered by contemporary Native American authors who took this figure from the original oral tradition and have brought it to the contemporary written fiction to continue its cultural fight of recuperating the Native tradition in an attempt to heal what has proven to be the sick reality in which these communities are immersed.

### **3. THE MIRROR EFFECT: RUBY AS THE TRICKSTER**

If the trickster is a cultural hero in search for the reemerging of the Native American culture, Ruby echoes this folkloric figure when, just like the trickster, she centers her energies in restoring her lost Native roots. Being deprived of her identity as a member of the Native communities by her white adoptive parents, Ruby lives physically and emotionally wandering for her Native ancestry, which encapsulate for Ruby the essence of her true identity. Therefore, Ruby recuperates the main trickster’s aim when the core element of her quest is connecting and celebrating her Native ancestral traditions. Precisely, Ellen B. Basso corroborates that the trickster normally represents a self that encompasses a whole community and acts as a mirror of the whole (292). In this case, all the needs and longings of Ruby as an individual who is part of the Native society echo the whole Native American panorama and find in the trickster the source of expression and resilience “to

prevent from falling in a complete crisis" (293). However, Ruby mirrors the trickster's feat not only because both of them share the same intentions concerning recuperating the Native identity, but because Ruby uses several tricks that are characteristic of the figure of the trickster and are present during its quests. This trickster's tricks may be regarded as immoral in a human scenario because they include high proportions of deceiving, lying and violence in several ways. However, as Robinson explains, the trickster never acts morally or immorally because its nature is amoral. Regardless of any ethics, these tricks take an active part in Ruby's resilience journey since they achieve the purpose of protecting Ruby from falling into a depressed scenario in which there is no solution for her existential void. They keep her going since they improve her way of living. Essentially, shapeshifting, pretending and lying are the three main trickster's ways of conduct that Ruby makes use of throughout the novel to help her thrive in life.

### **3.1 Shape-shifting**

The trickster is described by anthropologist Ellen B. Basso as "the spirit of disorder, the enemy of boundaries" (292). Undoubtedly, this figure has not a fixed form and could be considered "a rather vivid picture of a changeable, changing entity or form" (Mohr 3). The trickster might be a male, a female or an animal. Its aim is survival; thriving in a given context, and shape-shifting is one of the trickster's most characteristic resources to achieve its goal. Shape-shifting is one connection point between the trickster and Ruby. Although Ruby does not transform her body developing male or animal attributes like the traditional trickster in oral stories sometimes does, at some point Ruby disguises herself to be taken as a deaf man. The trickster's attribute of master of disguise allows Ruby to feel more protected while wandering around in the dark and dangerous streets of Canada.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> When Ruby was just a teenager, she escaped her white adoptive family to look for her biological Native family. She felt she did not belong in the place she was raised in and she needed her roots back to feel that desired sense of belonging she existentially lacks. It is possible to note that Ruby is exactly reproducing the trickster motivations and ways of procedure at this point. Bringing

Ruby, conscious of her situation of vulnerability, takes advantage of the male physique to have a better experience while being homeless: “people would think she was a boy and leave her alone. Being a girl came with its own distinct set of problems” (160). The fact that this is a conscious decision Ruby makes for survival makes it a strategy to thrive in a hostile atmosphere. Ruby progressively adapts the problem-solving logic of a trickster, and this, combined with the ability to change form and the shared objective of recovering the Native past draws these two characters closer and closer.

### **3.2 Pretending and Lying**

Together with shape-shifting, pretending and deceiving are central characteristics of the trickster. The trickster can be taken as the great pretender, the amoral deliverer of lies “who expertly exploit, cheat and manipulate those around them” (Hui). Again, Ruby makes use of the trickster ways to survive in society. Once Ruby becomes a grown-up woman, she is conscious of the trauma that she has developed during her childhood and youth. Therefore, one of her goals is to mitigate suffering and avoiding more traumatic inputs while she looks for her Native home. At some point in her life, Ruby faces the challenge of going to her children’s school for an interview and feels the necessity of pretending familiar stability for her children to have a better upbringing than hers, however, her familiar reality is decadent: She has a manipulative and psychologically abusive husband whom she married out of convenience rather than affection. Ruby wanted him to be her spouse just because he was a Métis man. Thus, the basis of the couple were originally toxic and self-sabotaging. Ruby’s husband, Moe, has a strong Native background having grown up in Métis culture and actively participating in Métis traditions. Ruby chose to marry him because, growing

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back section 2.2, it is possible to take into consideration that the trickster wants to regenerate the Native American culture, to bring back the lost voice of those communities affected by the British colonization. Similarly, Ruby escaped home after years of being abused and racially mistreated by her white parents to look for her Native American culture.

up feeling disconnected from her own Native heritage, she hoped that her husband's deep roots in Métis culture would validate her own sense of belonging. Therefore, their relationship is distant and almost over from the beginning. However, she does not want her children to be stigmatized at school for having a single mother so she activates her pretending mode to protect herself and her children of a possibly traumatic experience. Ruby expresses: "there was a stigma applied to single mothers. [...] if you could say, *My husband this* or *My husband that*, it would save you from being put into a compartment that attracted disrespect and abuse" (231). Lies and pretending then help Ruby to survive in a world that feels foreign and full of dangers to her.

#### **4. CREATING A NARRATIVE: A CONSTRICTION FOR CULTURE BUILDING**

Culture building, contrary to the lies and pretenses, seems to be far from being a characteristic of the trickster, but, on the contrary, it constitutes the target of this folklore figure and indeed, building up culture by means of new narratives seems to be precisely the objective of contemporary Native American writers when introducing the trickster in their stories and, on top of that, when continuing to write about their customs. Culture-building, then, constitutes again a shared intention between Ruby and the trickster. Through the novel, Ruby aims to regenerate her culture and throughout the course of her journey she starts writing her own narrative. Actually, Ruby is introduced as a deprived character, lost in the world: "Ruby longed to know something impossible, how they'd arrived here, just here, exactly" (101). For her, the only way to feel complete is finding her Native roots and connecting herself with her Native culture. Two main examples in this novel illustrate Ruby's process of culture-building. Both of them involve fake storytelling. This appears revealing since culture conforms cosmovision and it is directly linked with narratives and

storytelling in general. Just like cultures with a strong oral tradition, such as the case of Native Americans, pass the knowledge of their beliefs and principles through stories, storytelling has a direct impact on a culture because it shapes beliefs and ideas and creates a common acknowledgment and understanding of the world.

Throughout her youth, Ruby starts feeling the displacement inherited from being adopted and separated from her biological Native family: “Ruby knew being adopted made her feel awkward in her own skin” (75). Lost in the constant longing for a place to belong, Ruby starts looking for her Native paternal grandmother but before finding her, she denies admitting to other people that she was never close to the Native American way of living and culture. Therefore, she starts fabricating stories about her supposedly Native birth mother—who, as the narrative advances, turns out to be a white teenage girl—and she makes sure of telling those stories to her friends. Those made-up narratives place her birth mother in clear connection with earth and nature: “Now, every time I walk near a willow tree, she told Bart, I feel like I’m walking over my mother’s heart” (64). Interestingly enough, according to the Cultural Survival Organization, “nature is an essential part of many Indigenous communities and their laws” (Krenak-Naknanuk). Contrary to Westerners, Indigenous Peoples have Mother Earth as the core element of their cultural, judicial, and social systems. Therefore, having nature as part of her fake memories of her biological family allows her to feel not only closer to her supposed birth mother, but also to her roots in a deep and spiritual way. Moreover, and as importantly for Ruby, these Native stories involving the natural and spiritual provide her with a cover letter for strangers to position herself as the person she desires to be, a Native woman of upbringing.

Another instance of these made-up narratives is the fake family photos. Ruby stars hanging fake family pictures in the walls of her house for her children and herself to feel the sense of belonging she desires:

She filled their home with Native art, chip prints from second-hand stores, portraits of children and Elders from villages she didn't know where. And she told her boys these were cousins, aunts, uncles, moshoms and kohkums [...]. She created a mythology. Fabricated a family. To try and save her kids from the longing she'd felt her whole life [...], for something she felt in her blood. (76-77)

The photos constitute the target genealogy Ruby craves. This fake family is indeed what O'Brian labels as “an effective tool for self-organization and self-repair” (58) because the pictures, just like the stories about her birth mother, have a necessary function in both representing and assuring Ruby's identity as a Native woman. As a matter of fact, the author of *Probably Ruby* confirms that her main character “is continually needing to build her narrative” (Shea). It is only by means of a whole different life story that Ruby could recover herself from the incomplete existence she feels she has.

#### **4.1 Culture as an Artificial Construction**

Despite the apparent connection with her roots Ruby was feeling by means of those fake narratives, Ruby was aware of the reality. She was never ignorant thinking those stories she made up were an actual part of her life. As it is mentioned in section 3.2 of this dissertation, Ruby adapts the conscious strategies of the trickster to thrive in life. She is never lost in her own stories, and it is precisely because of that that they became “a necessary but insufficient condition for moving forward” (O'Brien 61). In the case of the family pictures, and although they represent the real

necessity of Ruby for a family, they never satisfy her completely. The family pictures constituted just a vehicle of resilience to allow her to find the momentary strength to continue in her quest of finding her real Native family. Once she managed to get some real family pictures after meeting her real paternal grandmother, “the first thing [Ruby] did was frame the photo carefully, before taking down one of the ‘family pictures’ and replacing it with Leon’s (her biological father) picture” (Bird-Wilson 94). This replacement fake-real pictures represents the progressive resurgence of her identity. In moments like this one, Ruby gets to rewrite her story with pieces of the truth, what conveys her rebirth into her new life. Actually, this reemerging of culture and identity has been “on the rise in recent decades in connection to Indigenous decolonial resistance” (Fraile-Marcos 7). At this point Ruby serves as a representation of the Native American community. She constitutes just an example through which contemporary Native writers, such as Lisa Bird-Wilson, illustrate the reality of their communities and the process of resurgence of their cultures.

It may seem contradictory that a character (either Ruby or the trickster) with the main objective of reemerging its culture based its process in inventing elements about the culture itself. However, it is necessary to take into account that the trickster, with its ambivalent nature, has as one of its functions to demonstrate the artificiality of culture *per se* (Wiget 90). In fact, Silvia Martínez-Falquina expresses that for the analysis of the trickster figure it is necessary to take into account the balance of its function as “culture-building” and “culture-subverting,” since that compound embodies the affirmation of “cultural coherence” and the same subversion of the idea of culture itself (“Trickster Discourse” 143). It is the trickster’s nature of reverting conventions what allows this figure to destroy and/or subvert established categories and thus, create a new ones

even when deceitful tricks are involved. Literature results indeed a tool to create nation and give the Native communities in this case, brief instances of culture and belonging.

## 5. RESILIENCE: THE JOURNEY AND THE AIM

As previously mentioned, contemporary Native American authors revive the figure of the trickster with the primary goal of revitalizing their communities' voices. Similarly, Ruby is a character of contemporary Native American fiction in which the trickster's aim of rejuvenating and preserving Native traditions is clearly reflected. In this process of reviving the lost culture, resilience is perhaps the core and omnipresent companion. In fact, in the case of Ruby, the trickster's tricks she uses to build up her narrative are precisely examples of her resilient development as a Native who is aware of the difficulties her culture is facing. According to the Oxford Dictionary, *resilience* is a term which describes "the ability of a substance to return to its original shape after it has been bent, stretched or pressed" ("Resilience"). Although the origin of this term describes a physical characteristic that a material might have, this ability is similarly applied to people who manage to recover themselves from an unpleasant or traumatic situation. As a matter of fact, and according to Fraile-Marcos, "resilience is linked to the capacity of beings—human or nonhuman, individual or collective—to withstand adversity, to endure by being flexible and adapt to crisis" (1). The emphasis on collectivity is key regarding this essay since the quality of resilience may be experienced by a community which undergoes a collective trauma as well. In the case of Native Americans, the traumatic environment of AIHT shares the contemporary panorama with that collective aim of reclaiming their identity from a history marked by mistreatment and loss. Therefore, the resilience process turns to be not only the consecutive journey of a culture

historically abused, but also the main objective of its members who aim to resist the catastrophe. Resilience, therefore, is both the journey and the aim.

### **5.1 The Journey**

Brad Evans and Julian Reid, discussing the nature of resilience in humans, put the focus on the impossibility of individuals to change the structural and critical environment in which they are living, which is prone to disadvantages and systematic violence in the majority of cases. Their research emphasizes the resilient and survivable human instincts as the core features that would allow a “human to be able to go on living and thriving in a context of such finitude, vulnerability and potential catastrophe” (61). The question then lies in how Ruby is fighting that catastrophe that she cannot change, and the answer to that question may rely in two different mechanisms: resistance and humor. First, the mechanisms of resistance she shows may be exemplified by her constant interest in understanding herself and fixing her dilemmas. The beginning of the novel portrays Ruby as a mature woman who is worried about her mental state and addiction problems and who voluntary attends a psychologist to help her. Moreover, there is certain progress in her life, such as the new real photographs replacing the old fake family pictures that motivate herself to continue. However, humor may be the biggest and more influential factor in Ruby’s resilience process.

The situation Ruby experiences, full of disaster, violence and sorrow, highly contrast with the humorous perspective that the novel displays. Lisa Bird-Wilson, when discussing her novel during the interview with H. Shea in 2022, expressed that humor is another “very Indigenous thing” when it comes to survival. Ruby embodies that with a laugh described as “big enough to be heard out of the room” (1). Moreover, the author recognizes that as soon as she saw Ruby’s laugh, she understood who she was and it felt like a gift (Shea). The author notices how Ruby recovers

part of her identity when she laughs, because humor, according to her, is something that connects Ruby to her Native self. This connection is explained when taking into account that comedy represents one powerful cultural entity. Native American cultures in the context of settler colonialism find in humor the resilient mechanism to bring the culture together. Through comedy, Ruby finds herself inside of a community that stays united: “This wasn’t exactly news in terms of racism in this town. All the same, Ruby struggled to process the cruelty. Even though she’d grown up seeing it, in different ways, every day. [...] She tried to block out the noise coming from the news. Tried to think of it as just ‘white noise,’ ha ha ha” (58-59). Ruby is saved by humor. She constantly laughs even when the situation is not precisely humorous. Comedy, indeed, encourages her to continue surviving. Connecting this humorous trait, she has with the trickster seems a simple task when recalling on the its comic nature. Anthropologist B. Basso characterizes the trickster as incorrigible, insatiable, deceptive, comic and transforming. Likewise, Barreiro-Neira labels the trickster as a “comic spirit” (46) and further explains that trickster express themselves through “humor, laughter and irony” (46). Similarly, Ruby’s laugh, which through the novel seems to appear in the worst scenarios and might be perceived as ridiculously extravagant, connects her to her community and functions the best resilient mechanism to cope with trauma. For both of these characters, comedy is a vehicle and the medium of expression to resist in any circumstances.

## 5.2 The Aim

Having discussed how resilience is an ongoing mechanism in the reality of Native population, it might be interesting to discuss what the outcome of that resistance journey is. In the case of Ruby, although her main objective is to recover from the absence of having no home, it seems that there is no resolution for her situation. Resilience seems to be, at least for her, both the journey and the aim. Ruby seems to be permanently lost, as if the damages of having been deprived of her roots

could never be restored. When she finally finds her biological paternal grandmother, the first thing she does is trying to make connections that bring them back together: “Do you think we have the same nose?” (93). However, although she has now pictures that proof her blood relationship with a Native family and she has contact with some of its members, Ruby’s longings and emotional lacks are still present. Ruby has found her biological family, but she feels foreign to them: “Ruby has just barely found her, no amount of time could make up for what she’d lost, but she wanted more than this” (101). It is not precise, perhaps, to say that there is no happy ending in this novel, because there is not even an ending. As previously introduced, *Probably Ruby*’s chapters are not chronologically ordered. The novel begins in 2013 and ends in 2009, which transmits the idea of a cyclical life in which anything is repaired, in which her problematic is never ending and Ruby is always going back to the starting point.

The last chapter of the book portrays a 34-year-old Ruby who seems to be recovering herself. It is set in 2009 and shows a Ruby who has managed to maintain a cordial and joyful relationship with the father of her children, appearing to care for them genuinely and displaying eagerness to provide them with the best she can. Moreover, her relationship with Dana seems to be based in support and respect. On top of that, and perhaps most importantly for the novel, the last image the book offers describes Ruby and Dana going to meet Ruby’s Native family, in which there is an atmosphere of hope for her actual reencounter with her roots. However, this image is accompanied by “a magpie hopped in the gutter, looking for something” (251). In the legends of some Native American tribes, this type of bird, highly common in the western part of Canada, is considered a loyal friend of humans in charge of warning them of danger. This symbol, who appears wondering, looking for something, indeed anticipates the reality of the situation. The sense of hope the ending transmits is suddenly dissolved when connecting the end -set in 2009- with the

beginning -set in 2013- of the novel since the chapter that follows chronologically speaking the last one in the novel is the first chapter in the book. This first chapter -set in 2013- is set four years after the apparent happy ending in which Ruby's wounds seemed to be healing. In this first chapter, the image of progress shown by the last chapter -set in 2009- is dismantled. Ruby is attending a psychiatrist, she feels as lost as when she was younger, she has a turbulent relationship with Dana,<sup>4</sup> and she is still addicted to alcohol and other drugs, even though she does not admit it. Although the end of the book tries to give that impression, Ruby's life never changed. She never distanced herself from dangerous relationships or quitted drugs, she did not achieve happiness when she found her Native family, and she could never feel part of any social group. She embodies an in-between figure that struggles to find its place. The wounds of her upbringing appear to be deeply ingrained, and her lost identity resulting from her forced adoption into a white family might be an unresolved aspect of her identity that remains unfulfilled. Being constantly resilient to that everlasting reality of catastrophe is all Ruby has left. Therefore, resilience is both her journey and her final aim.

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4 The life of Ruby is also marked by violent sexual intercourses in which she is psychologically abused and involved in drugs and other addictions such as alcohol. However, this dangerous environment is not something that stops Ruby from continuously exposing herself to this kind of relationships. Dana is a clear example of this since, although he is abusive, violent and consistently motivates Ruby to consume larger quantities of alcohol, he awakes in Ruby an unstoppable sexual desire "Her impulse was to caress him, wake him, take more, get more, demand something, extract all she could (referring to sex)" (13). With this behavior, Ruby is again mirroring the trickster, since this figure "ignores all kind of taboos and expected social behavior" (Martínez-Falquina, "Trickster Discourse" 46), has "extreme appetites for food and sex" (143) and a "compulsive and thoughtlessly excessive behavior, lust, gluttony, and especially greed for unsuitable objects and relationships (Basso 29). The trickster is an entity that claims rebellion and that can portray violence to signify something more meaningful within. Perhaps the author wanted to give her protagonist instances of power since the body is, according to García Navarro, used in Native American resilience stories as a space for the reinscription of meaning, she agrees that "the game of seduction is also a power game" (61). Another possibility, however, contemplates that this behavior may be the result of the violent social environment in which Native American communities are immersed, as it is exposed in the first chapter of this essay.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This contemporary Native American novel brings back some historical issues that, although originated in the past, seem to be still alive. Through the life of Ruby, Lisa Bird-Wilson manages to describe the challenging reality in which Native American communities are living nowadays. Ruby, immersed in problems of abuse of substances and dangerous sexual relationships, has as her main anxiety the lack of roots she feels after being deprived of her culture when she was a baby and was forcedly separated of her mother to be given in adoption to a white, abusive family. Ruby embodies in her life the everlasting mistreatment of Native cultures and the lack of belonging the communities suffer after having being historically removed of her families and land by the white governments ("Native American"). Apart from encapsulating the consequences of the colonization of the North American territory, *Probably Ruby* recuperates the characteristics of the Native American figure of the trickster which, not as a character but as a force, guides Ruby in her resilient journey with its tricks to survive and its goal of thriving in the reality of the settler colonization. Native American authors of contemporary fiction like Lisa Bird-Wilson revive the trickster, traditionally used in the oral tradition to enhance and teach Native American culture, to bring the voices back to the Native communities, create new narratives and emphasize the importance of Native tradition. By means of lying, pretending and writing new stories, the trickster inside of Ruby creates little by little her desired place in the world. As Jyotirmaya Tripathy expresses, "Native culture and literary traditions resisted and continue to resist the White American colonial assumption" (40) and the trickster in novels like *Probably Ruby* constitutes a clear example of it. As Silvia Martínez Falquina claimed, "the trickster is alive and kicking" ("Trickster Discourse" 141).

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